

NOTE: This story was significantly shortened on publication. The longer version (as yet unpublished) is included in this collection. It is the version which should be used for any future reprints.

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# YOUNG

catholic messenger



**"to stand before the world . . . as a symbol of the living God."** —see page 7

I THOUGHT the new men looked just about average. Only one was much taller than anybody else—even us seniors. And he looked about 30 pounds heavier than any of the rest of the squad.

Coach Nelson's eyes lit up. "What's your name?"

"James Hackett, sir."

"I haven't seen you around, Hackett. Freshman?"

"No, sir. I'm a senior. I transferred from Iron River High. It's up north, sir. Near the state line."

The coach nodded. "What position did you play?"

"We didn't have a football team, sir. Iron River is the smallest high school in the state. Not big enough to have a football team."

I didn't think the coach would put him in the line. We've got the finest line in the state—defensively, at least—and there's no sense in tampering with the best.

But with Hackett's size, I felt sure he'd be right for fullback. And the team could use one.

Milton Elderidge, the sports editor of the school paper, says the team really needs a fullback—and

# The Almost Magic Toe

by Jack Ritchie  
(The first of two parts)

a right half—and a left half—and quarterback.

I'm the quarterback.

We don't have such a bad team. Last season only 28 points were scored against us.

But our record for the seven games was no wins, two ties, and five losses.

And we didn't score a touchdown. Not even a field goal. We lost two games by the score of 7 to 0, two games 6 to 0, and one 2 to 0. The tie games ended 0 to 0.

We moved the ball pretty well in spots. We averaged 162 yards rushing per game and I completed 64 percent of my passes to lead the league.

Everything clicked, *until* we got well into our opponent's territory. Then everything went wrong.

Milt Elderidge says we're a team with a lot of color. All of it gray.

The next afternoon, the coach said, "Hackett, we'll try you at fullback."

I called the first team into a huddle. "Hackett, we'll try 3-A-3 first. A plain handoff and you drive between right tackle and right guard."

He nodded. "I got it."

Our team works from the T, and I took the ball direct from under the center, heeled back, turned, and slipped the ball to Hackett as he came by.

Our right guard and right tackle wedged open a nice lane.

But by the time Hackett got there, a lot of people were waiting to meet him. He lost about a yard.

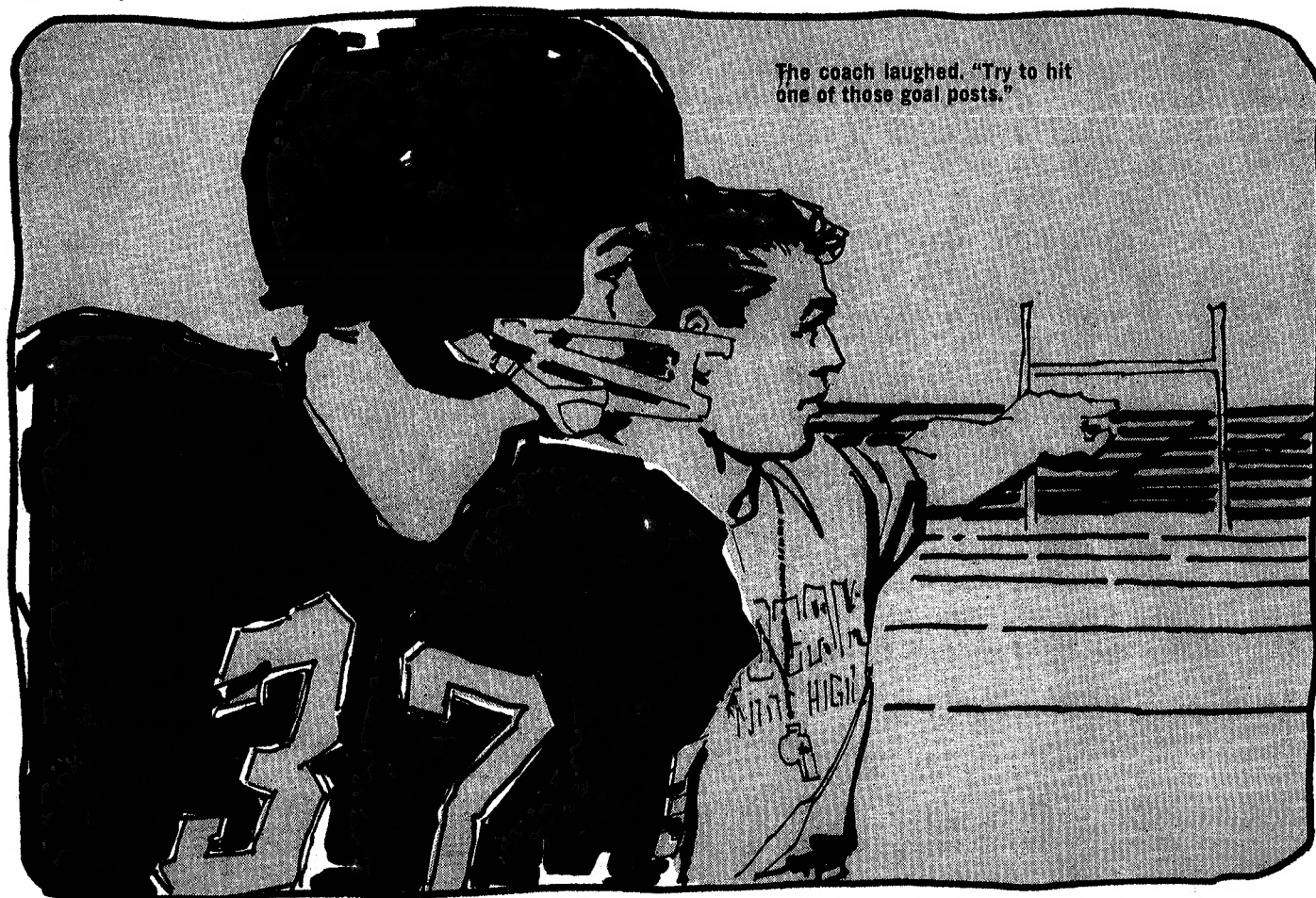
Back in the huddle, I said, "Hackett, you've got to hustle more."

He looked offended. "I *did*."

"We'll try 3-B-3," I said. "Same as the last one, only through the left side."

This time I shoveled the ball to

Illustrated by Ned Ostendorf



Hackett and stepped clear.

It took five men to bring him down, but he still lost two yards.

Coach Nelson walked out onto the field. "Hackett, why didn't you tell me you were so slow?"

Hackett shifted uneasily. "I didn't know I was slow. I never played football before, so I never had anybody to compare myself with."

Poor Hackett, so big and strong, and yet all that manpower was wasted because he couldn't put one foot in front of the other.

"But I can kick, sir," Hackett said.

Coach sighed. "All right. Let's see you kick."

"Where to?"

The coach laughed. "Try to hit one of those goal posts."

They were about fifty yards downwind.

"Which one?" Hackett asked.

Coach looked at him a little sharply. "Hit the right-side one. Make it four feet ten and three-quarter inches above the ground."

Hackett squinted down the field, took his step, and his foot connected.

The ball hit the right-hand goal post about seven feet off the ground.

Hackett frowned. "I underestimated the wind at my back, sir."

Coach didn't say a word, just nodded to Hackett to try another.

Hackett kicked six more times—and hit the goal post six times. Then

Coach made me trot up and down the sidelines, laying down a handkerchief for Hackett to aim at.

Out of twenty kicks, Hackett missed the handkerchief only twice—those times the distance was over sixty yards—and even then he didn't miss by more than a foot.

We quit practice when it got too dark to see anything but the smile on the coach's face.

It didn't take much imagination to figure out how much Hackett was going to mean to the team.

We had the best defensive team in the conference last year, allowing an average of only four points per game. And this year we had practically the same line from end to end.

Maybe we couldn't push the ball over the goal line, but this year we wouldn't have to. All we needed was to get the ball near our opponent's 40-yard line. From that distance we could count on Hackett to get us three points with a field goal. We ought to get that close seven or eight times in a game.

As practice continued, Milton Elderidge began coming to watch the team and get information for his column. He walked over to me one day while I was taking a breather on the bench.

"I suppose you expect to win all your games with field goals?" he

said in a sarcastic tone of voice.

"What's wrong with that?"

"I thought you had more pride."

"What's pride got to do with it?"

He shrugged. "If I were on an offensive team that had no offense, it would bother me."

"Well, don't let it keep you awake nights. You're not on the team."

Hackett asked about the canvas-covered mound near the 50-yard line.

"That's our cannon. We fire a blank every time the team scores a touchdown," Elderidge said. "It hasn't been fired in more than a year. The barrel's probably rusty."

I glared at him. "It is not."

"Well, it won't have a chance to get rusty this season," Hackett said.

Elderidge still looked gloomy. "The cannon isn't fired for field goals. Only touchdowns. It's a school tradition."

That Saturday afternoon we met Jefferson High.

Prentiss, our left half, took the opening kick-off on the nine and brought it back to the 30 before he was downed.

On the first play from scrimmage, I faded back and tossed one to the left end. He pulled it in on the Jefferson 48 and got nailed in his tracks. But it was a first down.

On third and two, I fired a short pass to Wittich, but he let it slip away.

It was fourth and two on the Jefferson 40; Hackett trotted onto the field.

As we shifted into field goal formation, I don't think there was a man on the Jefferson team who wasn't positive that we were going to fake.

When Hackett swung his leg, the ball rose and sailed right between the uprights.

Our line held Jefferson—and after a long drive we stalled on their 24.

The field goal was easy for Hackett—another three-pointer. At game's end, the score was 24 to 0. Hackett had kicked eight field goals to set a conference record.

Of course, most of us were delighted at winning our first game in more than a year. But not Elderidge. He looked gloomy. I tried to shrug off the uneasy feeling that our victory might have been a freak, an accident. But I couldn't...

(to be concluded)

YOUNG CATHOLIC MESSENGER



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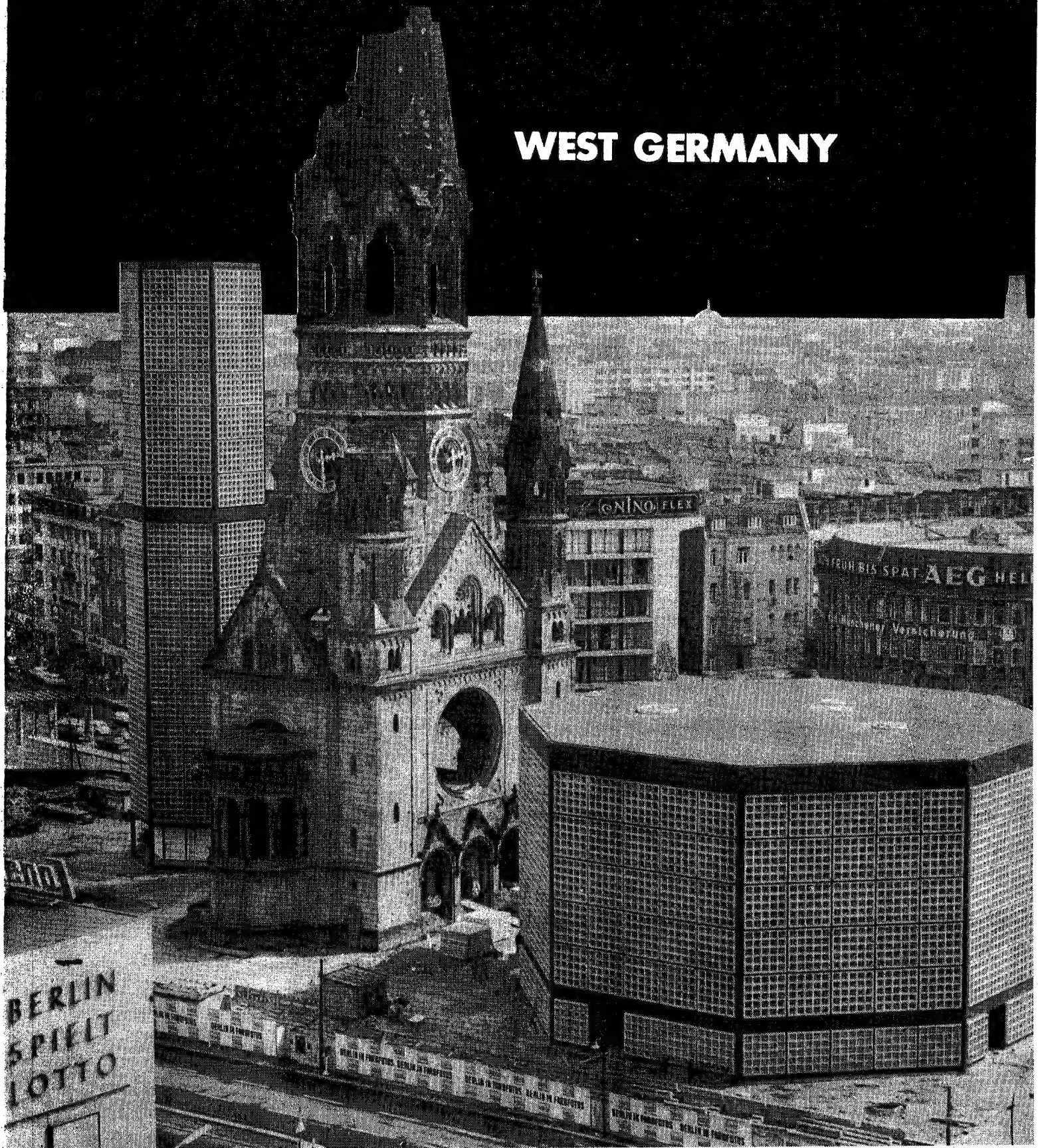
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My age is \_\_\_\_\_ my grade \_\_\_\_\_ (YCM)



# WEST GERMANY



WHEN the school paper came out on Wednesday, Elderidge had praise for Hackett and for our defensive unit, but his last line really hurt. "The offensive platoon appeared on the field at regular intervals—mostly to keep the Jefferson players from feeling lonely."

That Saturday, we took Monitor, 21 to 0. The week after, Roosevelt went down, 18 to 6. Next, we clobbered Delaven Tech, 27 to 0. Hackett's toe accounted for all of our points.

At practice before the next game, I noticed Hackett walk over to the cannon at the 50-yard line. He took the canvas off one end and looked down the barrel.

I joined him.

"Rust," he said.

"Not much." I put my arm in the barrel and rubbed at the spot with my sleeve.

Hackett looked thoughtful. "Have you ever heard it fired?"

My face got red. "Sure. When I was a sophomore on the third team."

That Saturday we took on Rutherford High, and with less than one minute left, we were ahead 18 to

Illustrated by Ned Ostendorf

# The Almost Magic Toe

by Jack Ritchie

(Conclusion)

7. It was third down, with eight yards to go, on our opponent's 13.

Wittich took my pass just in bounds on the sidelines about two yards beyond the line of scrimmage.

It looked as if he could scamper for the first down, maybe even drive for....

But he whirled and recrossed the scrimmage line. He ran behind it to a point about midway between the sidelines and then tried to drive straight ahead like a fullback.

He lost two yards.

Fourth and ten, and Hackett ran onto the field.

He glared at Wittich. "Why didn't you go for the first down? You might've even gone all the way after

you caught the pass."

Wittich shifted a little. "But suppose I *didn't* make the first down? We'd have had the ball right near the sidelines on fourth down. You would have had an almost impossible kicking angle."

"So you sacrificed a first down—maybe a touchdown—just so that I would have a better kicking position?"

"Why not? A *positive* three points is better than a *maybe* six."

We went into formation. Hackett booted. The ball slewed off to the left. Hackett blinked and his mouth dropped.

The game ended, 18 to 7.

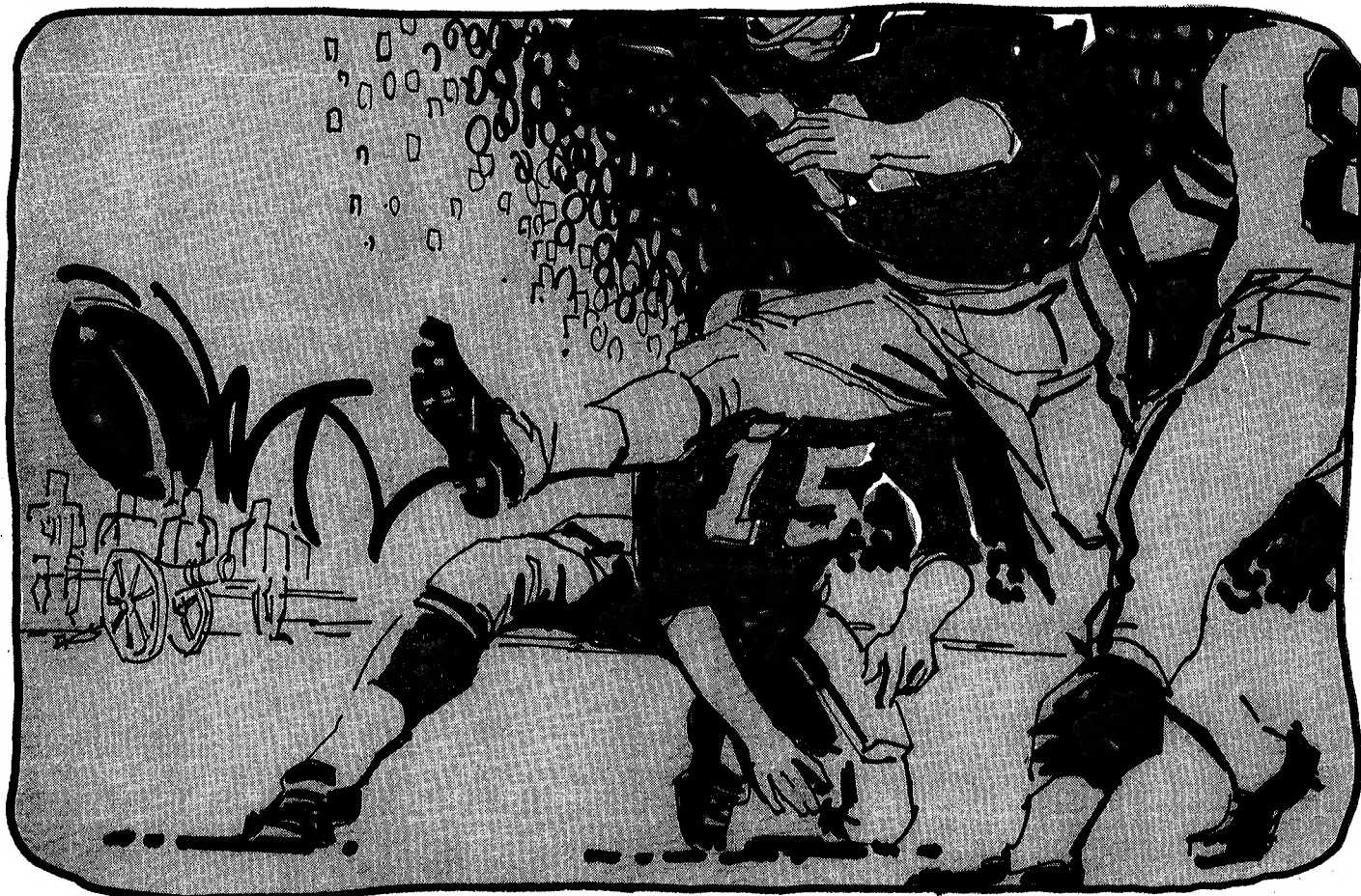
When we trotted off the field, I looked toward the press table. Elderidge was glaring. Mostly at Wittich.

During practice the next week, I noticed that a lot of Hackett's kicks were going to the left or the right of the goal posts.

I began to get a cold feeling. Was he getting stale, or falling into a slump?

On Saturday we met the Merris Falls Trojans.

(Continued on page 14)





## Magic Toe—

(Continued from page 11)

They won the toss and elected to receive. Hackett boomed the kick-off over the end zone—as usual—and the Trojans took over on their own 20.

We had figured them for the T, but they came out single wing, and moved the ball fairly well, getting three first downs in a row.

And then, on second down and six on our 27, our defensive team suddenly found itself looking at the I formation. Before it could adjust, the Trojan quarterback fired a long looper into the corner of the end zone where a Merris Falls end waited to haul it in.

The point after was missed, but the score was 6 to 0.

During the first half, we never managed to get the ball downfield far enough for field goal position, but Hackett had the chance to boom some nice long punts.

When we trotted onto the field for the second half, we weren't particularly worried. The Trojan defense was playing way over its head and that couldn't last. The records showed that.

Besides, it seemed like a cinch for us to move the ball into field goal territory at least half a dozen times in the next two quarters.

Olson, our right half, took the kick-off all the way down to the Merris Falls 19 before he was caught.

The next two plays netted five. On third and five, I faded back.

The line held and I had time to see Wittich all alone in the end zone.

I cocked my arm.

And then a lot of things flashed through my mind.

Suppose Wittich dropped the ball? If he *did* drop it, we'd have fourth down with the ball in an awkward position for Hackett's field goal try.

Wittich's words came back to me. "A *positive* three points is better than a *maybe* six."

I tucked the ball under my arm and angled toward my left. I was caught, and lost four yards, but that didn't matter. We had the ball squarely in front of the goal posts.

When Hackett came into the huddle, he spoke to me. "Wittich was in the clear. Didn't you see him?"

I explained my strategy and ex-

pected him to nod approvingly. He didn't.

I propped the ball and Hackett stepped into it. The kick was no good, and Hackett was silent as he walked off the field.

When we finally got the ball back, we picked up a first down. On the next sequence of plays I kept the calls through the center of the line or off tackle.

We went no place and had fourth and six on the Merris 33. But the ball lay in front of the goal posts again and that was what I'd been aiming for.

Hackett came in. "Conway, their defense was pulled in on each of those last three plays. They were expecting you to try the line. Why didn't you sweep wide or go for a pass?"

I felt my ears redden. "I'm the



quarterback on this team; I call the plays."

This time Hackett's try for the field goal went way off to the left.

The clock ticked on until there were only six minutes to play. We got another fourth down on the Merris 26. Right in front of the goal posts. . . .

Hackett *had* to make this one! And if we could get possession of the ball once more, we might at least tie.

When Hackett came in, he called for a time out.

He looked us over. "This time we're going to fake the kick."

"Fake?" I asked.

He nodded. "That's what Coach wants."

I frowned. "Is there something wrong with your foot?"

"No," he said evenly. "But there's

plenty wrong with this team. Last year you didn't score a single touchdown. That's unusual, but it's possible. The point is that last year you were *trying*."

His eyes skipped from face to face. "This year, you haven't even tried. Your only aim is to get the ball in a position so that I can kick a field goal. This team is a one-man team. *Me*."

A sudden suspicion crossed my mind. "Did you deliberately miss those kicks?"

"No. I have my bad days, too." Then he glared at us. "Are you *afraid* to score a touchdown?"

"All right," I snapped. "Let's get on with the play."

The ball came back to where I crouched on one knee. I went back and to my right with the ball. Hackett moved in front of me for any blocking that might have to be done.

The play caught the Merris team off guard. I had the choice of two open receivers in the end zone, and Wittich took the pass with ease.

Central High had scored its first touchdown in two years.

The crowd exploded into the loudest roar I've ever heard. Suddenly I realized something.

I hadn't heard the cannon fired.

I called time out and trotted over to where Milton Elderidge stood beside the gun. Another one of his jobs was to fire it.

"How come I didn't hear anything?" I asked.

He flushed. "I forgot to bring out the blanks. They're in the locker room." He got even redder. "I never thought we'd need them."

I almost choked. I couldn't say a word. I just pointed.

I guess my look scared Elderidge, because he ran off the field toward the locker room as if he were competing in the 100-yard dash.

The referee came over to see what was holding up our try for the extra point. When I told him, he called an official time out.

We waited. Everybody on the field, and in the stands, waited.

When Elderidge came rushing back onto the field, he toted half a dozen blanks. Just to be on the safe side, I guess.

And when that cannon finally boomed, I *knew* it wasn't the last time we'd hear it. It made such a nice noise.